Making Slavery in New France



Indigenous and Atlantic Histories

Common-place sits down with Brett H. Rushforth to discuss his 2012 book, *Bonds of Alliance: Indigenous and Atlantic Slaveries in New France*, and the challenges of integrating Atlantic history, Native history, and continental history.

The enslavement of Native Americans in Canada is not usually high on the list of topics in early American and Atlantic history, or even the history of slavery. What led you to tell this particular story?

Between the 1660s and 1760s, the colonists of New France held thousands of American Indians as slaves, perhaps as many as ten thousand over the course of the century in a relatively small colony. Targeting hundreds of distinct Native peoples, the slave trade that supplied the colony reached across vast spans of geography, from Plains Apache villages on the southwestern Plains, to Sioux settlements in modern Minnesota, through Fox and Sauk communities near the Great Lakes, and into the St. Lawrence Valley. Enslaved Natives lived in every major settlement in New France, and many were shipped to French islands in the Caribbean. Unlike most North American colonies, in New France enslaved Indians remained the predominant form of unfree labor throughout the eighteenth

century. Given the extent and scale of this slave system—and how profoundly it shaped both French-Native relations and social life in the St. Lawrence Valley—it is less remarkable that I stumbled onto the topic than that so little had been written about it before.

My initial question was fairly straightforward. I knew that French fur traders were relatively successful at forming alliances with Native peoples: they lived in Native villages, learned Native languages, and developed long-term intimate relationships with Native women. These bonds, mostly forged for the purposes of trade, also translated into important military alliances that protected the people of New France from their much more numerous British colonial neighbors. Yet French colonists also held a significant number of Indians as slaves. *Bonds of Alliance* began as a dissertation studying the nexus of these two colonial dynamics, assessing the relationship between alliance and slavery in French-Native relations.

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Although I did not realize it at first, this question forced me into a simultaneous exploration of two worlds that had been discussed more or less separately in earlier scholarship. Until very recently, historians of New France, like those studying other North American colonies, tended to focus either on colonial settlements and their Atlantic ties, or on the history of European-Native relations, but rarely both together. This made the slave trade hard to see because in each context only a small piece of the system was visible. Social historians came across enslaved Natives a few at a time in judicial, notarial, or Catholic parish records: a handful of Fox teenagers growing hemp, a few Sioux children working as domestics, and a string of individuals vaguely identified as "Panis/Pany" washing laundry or loading boats. Scholars of French-Native relations read Fox and Sioux complaints about French-sponsored slave raids. But it was impossible to evaluate the significance of these fragments in isolation. My starting question forced me to cross the usual regional divides because answering it required me to look at both French colonial towns and French-Native interactions. I had to search for enslaved people in the baptismal and burial records, notarized contracts and inventories, court dossiers, and institutional papers that had provided such rich material for social histories of the St. Lawrence Valley. But I also had to search for evidence of the slave trade in the official correspondence, missionary letters, and travel accounts that informed studies of Native history. Over time I began to see connections between shifting slave populations in French settlements and shifting geopolitics in the western region the French called the *pays d'en haut* ("the upper country," roughly the western Great Lakes and upper Mississippi Valley). It also became clear that these connections spilled into the Atlantic. French ideas about the Niger River

Valley influenced their reading of the Platte River Valley. Martinique's struggle to get African slaves during Saint Domingue's sugar boom facilitated slaving raids on the Great Plains. Freedom suits by enslaved Africans in Paris emboldened enslaved Indians in Montreal.

Although Atlantic and continental approaches to early America overlap in important ways, Atlantic histories have tended to overlook the centrality of American Indians to the shaping of colonial development, while continental histories have often underestimated the degree to which Europe and Africa influenced interior North America. As long as Native history is treated as a separate field of study, Native peoples will likely remain marginal to serious discussion of "colonial America," absurd as it might seem to discuss settler colonialism without accounting for the people who lived in the areas being colonized. *Bonds of Alliance* links these two approaches, developing indigenous and Atlantic contexts with equal attention. By demonstrating the connections, and not just the distinctions, between these two worlds, I hope my work will inspire others to develop new ways of understanding early modern colonialism by fully reckoning with Native peoples as influential actors in the Atlantic world.

One of the key distinctions you make is between the process of enslavement and the status of being a slave. Why was that so central to your argument?

Slavery has taken so many forms throughout human history that historians, anthropologists, and sociologists scarcely know how to define it. That is why some of the most important works on comparative slavery center on the narrow question: what is slavery? Many of these studies—most notably Orlando Patterson's *Slavery and Social Death* and Claude Meillasseux's *Anthropologie de l'esclavage (The Anthropology of Slavery)*—respond to this question by searching for abstract analytic frameworks that make slavery more universally comprehensible. Slavery, they insist, is X but not Y; it has these attributes but not those. Recognizing the wide variety of societies that practiced slavery, the goal of these works is to filter out the extraneous particulars in order to identify common denominators that define the essence of a complex and evolving institution.

Bonds of Alliance takes nearly the opposite approach, reconstructing slavery within its specific cultural, legal, economic, and political contexts rather than reducing it to a set of common characteristics. The Latin term for slave, *famulus/famula*, nicely captures slavery's historical connection to other institutions that regulate intimate expressions of power. And like many of those institutions—family, household, and property, for example—the meaning of slavery varied significantly across time and space. As I began this book, it seemed much more interesting and useful to emphasize particularity over commonality, to recreate (to the extent possible) the specific ways that people conceived of and attempted to shape the role of enslaved people within their communities. My approach was most influenced by an article I read during my second year of graduate school, written by James Watson, a historian of China.

As he explains, slavery is best understood in relation to other institutions and statuses within a given society rather than in relation to slavery in other societies. “The relationship characterized by slavery is by no means universal,” he argues, “but it is ‘special’ in the sense that, wherever and whenever it appears, slavery *is*distinguishable from other forms of exploitation in the same society.”

As I worked to understand the particular expressions of slavery in both the Native communities of the *pays d’en haut* and the French communities of the Mediterranean and Caribbean, I was struck by just how different the logic of the two systems seemed to be. The usual commonalities were there: the violent alienation of outsiders, persons being owned like property, captive labor performing various tasks for another person or household. But, while slavery stood apart from other forms of subordination in each society, its essential purpose was quite different in Native and French minds.

One of the most marked of these differences was how each group understood *enslavement*: the process of making someone a slave. For Native people, enslavement was the most important aspect of slavery, really its central purpose. Subordinating enemies demonstrated the slavers’ strength and, they believed, captured the power of the victims. But the intent was not to create a perpetual underclass to labor for the captors. Instead, slavery in the indigenous *pays d’en haut* was incorporative, drawing outsiders in through a process of forced assimilation. Native people thus spent very little energy policing pathways out of slavery, and in many ways they encouraged such journeys, because the more an outsider assimilated, the more fully the purpose of enslavement would be realized.

French slavery, on the other hand, focused on perpetuating slaves’ status, keeping them in bondage as long as possible so they could work to produce sellable commodities like tobacco and sugar. Unlike their indigenous counterparts, French thinkers drew a strict legal and moral distinction between the act of enslavement and the institution of slavery. To their minds, enslavement was so complete as to effectively end the life of the captive, and the captor’s choice to spare the victim’s life granted him unrestricted ownership of the spared captive. Rather than focus on entries into slavery, then, French efforts centered on closing down pathways out of slavery. This often meant creating narratives of exclusion that made it difficult for former slaves to assimilate into colonial society. It also facilitated a legally plural empire in which enslavement, slavery, and the merchant activities that depended on both could operate in separate legal spheres—insulating Caribbean planters from continental critiques of West African slaving and French sugar merchants from the moral hazards of profiting from slave labor.

When these two very different ways of understanding slavery came into prolonged conversation in the North American slave trade, their divergent approaches to enslavement became both a point of conflict and a site of creative adaptation. The French would have preferred, for example, to obscure the ethnic identity of

captives and to ignore the circumstances of their capture. This made little sense to their Native allies, for whom the identity of their captives and the means of their subordination were of central importance. Similar tensions emerged over questions of how permanent and inescapable slave status should be, including what happened to enslaved enemies when their people reconciled and formed alliances with their Native captors or their French owners. Enslavement, then, provides a useful window onto both the cultural differences separating French and Native slaveries and the adaptations and innovations that grew out of their encounter.

The second chapter stands out in Bonds of Alliance *because it is primarily an intellectual history of French ideas about slavery in the Caribbean. When in the process of writing the book did you decide that you needed such a chapter, and can you expand a bit on the role of the Caribbean ideologically in Canadian slave practices?*

Chapter 2 ("The Most Ignoble and Scandalous Kind of Subjection") draws its title from the writings of the seventeenth-century legal philosopher Hugo Grotius, whose 1626 book *De jure belli et pacis* (*The Rights of War and Peace*) both reflected and shaped French approaches to slavery. I had initially meant for this chapter to be a brief synthesis of existing literature on the emergence of slavery in the French Atlantic world. As it turned out, relatively little work had explored the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century origins of French slavery, and most work focused on the later eighteenth century. So I had to piece the narrative together using a wide range of manuscript and printed primary sources in French and Caribbean archives.

The story that emerged centers on how French laws and institutions responded to a resurgence of slavery in the sixteenth century in the Iberian Atlantic and, more urgently, in North Africa where thousands of French captives labored as slaves themselves. So there is a fair amount of legal history, including some purely intellectual history, in this early discussion of French slavery. But those ideas are not legible outside their social context, which is why much of the chapter focuses on the lived realities of slavery in the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century French world.

A related question would be to ask why it seems natural to characterize the study of European (but not Native American) ideas about slavery as "intellectual history." The book's first two chapters ask essentially the same questions of two different communities, exploring how each of them understood, explained, and practiced slavery in the decades preceding their North American encounter. Yet I think many, and possibly most, readers will draw a similar distinction between the two because of the sources on which they are based. I would hope no one believes that only Europeans had ideas about slavery (while Indians had timeless, unthinking traditions). Yet it would be hard to dispute that analyzing Algonquian insults ("I lift up her breechcloth, treat her like a slave," "[you are a] slave woman's worthless penis") feels quite different than reading Grotius. But as Michèle Duchet, Laurent Dubois, and Hilary Beckles have

argued, we should not allow the scarcity of surviving sources to persuade us that non-Europeans existed, in Beckles's words, "in an atheoretical world which was devoid of ideas." Instead, our challenge is to find creative ways to see ideas where they can be seen, whether they were printed on a page or expressed in a ritual feast. Despite having access to quite different source bases, I have tried to take the ideas of each group seriously, and to see how they fit within a social world where slavery was only one of many subordinate statuses.

You argue that the slave trade empowered France's Indian allies in such a way that they were able to thwart French territorial expansion in the interior for decades. Can you explain how that process worked?

The North American slave trade did not operate with European aggressors on one side and victimized Indians on the other. Native peoples participated in the slave trade and often determined its contours to suit their evolving interests. Initially, slaves passed from Native to French hands in small-scale diplomatic ceremonies, where captive enemies were given as gifts to create or affirm alliances. Offering a captive to an ally signaled the giver's strength and enjoined the receiver to accept the victim's people as a shared enemy. The Native peoples of the *pays d'en haut* used slavery as a way to assert their vision of alliance with colonial newcomers. By raiding a neighbor, then giving or selling the captives to the French, they marked the victims as outsiders and asked the French to do the same. When these raids succeeded—and they often did—they profoundly limited French options as they tried to extend their colonial reach.

For example, when French traders started moving into Sioux country in earnest around the beginning of the eighteenth century, their allies (who were at war with the Sioux) felt betrayed, fearing the strength the Sioux would draw from European weapons. French traders, they complained, "were carrying aid to their enemies." For the next four decades, each time French traders reached into Sioux country, their efforts were thwarted by strategic slave raiding that targeted Sioux villages and then sold the slaves to French buyers. Slave raids disrupted trade in the short term, and French colonists holding Sioux slaves predictably hurt longer-term efforts to develop a French-Sioux alliance.

Perhaps the best example of this occurred in 1742. After months of negotiations, a French trader convinced a large number of Sioux that the French could stop the slave raids and mediate a peace between them and their French-allied enemies. When Sioux delegates made the long trip to Montreal to formalize this relationship, they found Sioux children working as slaves in French households. Angry at this obvious evidence of French duplicity, the Sioux delegation left Montreal without concluding an agreement, forcing French traders out of Sioux country for the third time in as many decades. The success of this strategy allowed New France's Native allies to use the French demand for slaves as a weapon against French westward expansion, blocking attempted alliances west of the Mississippi River that would have drawn the French far deeper into the North American interior.

One of the key concepts over the past twenty years for understanding Native-French interactions in the interior, or pays d'en haut*, has been Richard White's "middle ground." It seems in* Bonds of Alliance *that you seek not only to revise the concept but also to transcend it (you cite White frequently, but rarely if ever use the phrase in your text). How did you come to decide to frame the book in that way?*

Richard White's *The Middle Ground* is an extraordinarily insightful book and has deservedly become one of the classics of twentieth-century American historiography. It would be difficult to overstate the book's significance in reorienting how historians discuss cultural encounters in early America, and French-Native relations in particular. Above all, White powerfully demonstrated that early American cultural relations were not a zero-sum game between two fully separate entities, with colonizers either eroding Native cultures or failing to do so in the face of Native resistance. In much of North America, colonizers and Native people could only obtain their objectives by adapting to what they perceived to be the cultural expectations of the other. Over time, through thousands of small acts of accommodation, a new regional culture emerged that was neither fully Native nor European but a product of the colonial encounter. *Bonds of Alliance* follows this way of understanding colonial-Native relations, arguing that the Native slave trade itself was a product of exactly the kind of cultural adaptation and innovation that White had in mind. As I explain in the introduction, "Slavery reveals a somber dimension to cultural accommodation in the Pays d'en Haut, showing that its success was often founded on a shared commitment to violence. Yet even this violence was a product of mutual adaptation and produced new cultural forms that persisted for generations" (11).

However, I decided not to use the specific term "the middle ground" for two reasons. First, as a general rule I avoided all jargon or catch phrases that would mean something particular to scholars already familiar with them but that might be misread or not understood by students or general readers. Second, as White himself has noted, in the two decades since he published the book, the idea of "the middle ground" has taken on a life of its own, applied to such varied historical contexts that it has come to mean many things to many people. Rather than use a phrase carrying so much scholarly baggage, I chose to explain my interpretation on its own terms, leaving it to others to make what comparisons they found most useful.

Then, too, despite broad agreement on the general *process* of cultural encounter, *Bonds of Alliance*and *The Middle Ground* offer substantially different readings of certain historical dynamics that shaped French-Native relations in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. With over nine hundred pages of text between the two books, it would be impossible to explain every interpretive difference here. But there are several ways that, in my view, accounting for Native slavery invites a reconsideration of important aspects of both Native and French colonial histories. Ranging from the nature of the indigenous social world of the *pays d'en haut* to the forces checking French westward expansion,

the slave trade provides a new lens through which to view questions that have interested scholars studying this region for decades. And because it linked the *pays d'en haut* to the broader dynamics of the early modern Atlantic, the Indian slave trade powerfully reveals that the Native people of the North American interior were simultaneously more connected to, and less overwhelmed by, early modern colonialism than previous studies have suggested.

Further reading:

For James Watson's comments on understanding slavery, see "Slavery as an Institution," in Watson, ed., *Asian and African Systems of Slavery* (Berkeley, 1980): 1-15. On the question of definitions of slavery, see Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982); Claude Meillasseux, *Anthropologie de l'esclavage: le ventre de fer et d'argent* (Paris, 1986); Laurent Dubois, "An Enslaved Enlightenment: Rethinking the Intellectual History of the French Atlantic," *Social History* 31 (February 2006): 1-14. For further perspectives on Native American and European interactions, see Paul Cohen, "Was there an Amerindian Atlantic?: Reflections on the Limitations of a Historiographical Concept," *History of European Ideas* 34 (2008): 388-410; Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815* (Cambridge, 1991).